

## **Living Towns: Promoting Local Heritage to Revitalize Our Towns**

The Shenandoah Valley is known for its historic towns located on the Valley Pike, (U.S. Route 11), or the U.S. Route 340 corridor. Containing fine collections of buildings dating from the mid-18th century to the present, these towns feature a variety of historic structures such as early log dwellings, large Queen Anne-style houses with wraparound porches, Victorian-era stores and churches, gristmills, apple warehouses, and early-20th-century schools. While some towns were already using their historic buildings as community assets, others showed great potential in promoting these resources as catalysts for community revitalization.

The Living Towns programs began in 1997 as a means to focus on the active work of many residents, as well as the great potential of the 15 municipalities in the valley. Stephens City Planning Commission member Linden “Butch” Fravel expressed a desire to meet with and learn from representatives of other Virginia communities who were successful in preserving the unique qualities of their respective towns. The new DHR Winchester Regional Preservation Office responded along with the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission. The banner “living towns” was chosen to represent both the goal and the outcome for those communities in which heritage stewardship plays a major role in sustaining economic stability and preserving the historic resources that make towns attractive places in which to live and visit.

The first Living Towns conference, held in Stephens City, was attended by over 40 people anxious to hear preservation success stories. Presentations ranged from the economic benefits of heritage stewardship and tourism development to specific projects such as the establishment of a historic district, the use of rehabilitation tax credits, and the contributions of the Main Street program to transform struggling downtowns to vital commercial centers once again. A locally catered lunch, paid for by the modest conference registration fee, and a walking tour of Stephens City were provided by the host town.

The program was such a success that communities lined up to host the next Living Towns conference. All were anxious to showcase their towns and celebrate their history in creative ways. Strasburg hosted the 1998 conference followed by Front Royal, Middletown, and New Market in ensuing years. In 1998, the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Commission joined as a sponsor. Attendance has increased each year with a high of 80 participants at the 2001 event, and has brought new speakers and an emphasis on new topics related to enhancing the quality of life in small towns.

The Living Towns concept has now moved across the Blue Ridge Mountains to the northern Piedmont region of Virginia. On May 22, 2002, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission and the Town of Orange hosted a regional Living Towns conference attended by about 50 individuals representing towns and organizations throughout the area.

The Living Towns program has proven successful beyond the initial expectations of the preservation partners who established the first conference. In fact, the Living Towns program won a 2002 Innovation Award from the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), which will be presented at its national conference in September 2002.

Other regions could also host such a conference. As Tom Christoffel, senior planner with the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission, has stated, “It was our intent from the start that Living Towns could be a model for other planning commissions to use to promote the livability of towns in their regions.” What about a Living Towns conference in your area? What success stories could you share to benefit other towns in your region? For more information about getting started, call David Edwards, director of DHR’s Winchester Regional Preservation Office, at (540) 722-3428.

—David Edwards